

Year 2000 In Nationwide Tribute To Jazz Genius Louis Armstrong

by Wilma Dobie

On the death of Louis Armstrong in July 6, 1971 Whitney Balliett, dean of America's jazz writers, reflected in his book, *Ecstasy at the Onion*, "Louis Armstrong was the first great American musician. He all but invented jazz, which remains the wellspring of American music."

The recent March of Jazz Festival held in Clearwater, Florida drew over fifty of today's foremost jazz artists and this seemed like an interesting opportunity to tap a few of today's jazz musicians on their thoughts about this Year of Tribute to Louis Armstrong.

Dan Barrett - "Louis Armstrong was a genius for the ages. He will always be an inspiring influence to all musicians. It's a sad fact that jazz will never be as popular as it was in the '30's and '40's. However, I believe the recordings left by Armstrong and other marvelous musicians of that era will continue to be heard by younger generations and that there will be an "underground" fraternity of younger players dedicated to learning and perpetuating this special kind of jazz worldwide."

Kenny Davern - "Louie was the most dynamic musician of all jazz. He transformed pop music into an art form and we shouldn't muck it up."

Clark "Cee Tee" Terry - "Pops was my Master. Yes, I have fond memories of him. There was a time in Corona, New York when Dizzy Gillespie was living on 105th Street, Pops was on 107th Street, and I lived on 112th. This was some years ago, of course, and at that time Dizzy and I were digging mod/bop jazz. We'd get together with other musicians - Phil Woods, Buddy DeFranco, me on my flugelhorn. We'd play ourselves out on all kinds of songs going around like, "I Want a Little Girl," "Wine and Roses." Pops didn't want any part of this kind of jazz. Did you know Pops liked to tell the history of jazz?"

(Note to "Cee Tee": The New York Times' veteran jazz reporter, John S. Wilson, seemed to have had not only an insight but a ready appreciation of Armstrong's sense of jazz history. Reporting on a New York appearance Armstrong made shortly before his death, Wilson wrote, Sunday, March 7, 1971: "Louis Armstrong is a sort of walking Smithsonian Institution of jazz - he carries so much of its history and development in his person - has reopened his institutional doors after a long illness and is putting this collection on display once again at the Empire Room of the Waldorf-Astoria.")

"Well, he liked to tell very much. We'd ring his bell and when we told Pops who we were he'd growl," '*Come on in.*' 'Once inside, I'd say,' '*Pops, now quite aside from the beautiful history of jazz you can tell, we've come here to get our batteries charged.*'"

"On one occasion I went over to see Pops and I alerted him that I was there to inform him on two special events. I said: '*Pops, Quinnipac College (Hampden, CT) wants to do a Festival in your honor and additionally, Howard University Festival wants to bestow on you a Doctorate Degree for Special Musicians.*' 'What's that?' Pops hollered out in that deep rumble voice of his. '*They givin' me a Doctorate Degree now? Hey, where were they 40 years ago when I really needed them?*'"

"I don't remember exactly what year it was when I was playing in New Orleans; and some of us musicians took a sight-seeing bus. The tour guide was pointing out all the special interest places - old Southern homes, historic buildings, the docks, statues. Then it hit me, here we are, jazz musicians riding around New Orleans where Louie Armstrong was born and there is no statue for him. I looked over to Floyd Levin (jazz journalist) and asked him, '*How come there's no statue for Louie?*' Quickly Floyd spoke up, '*Matter of money.*'"

"I took a dollar out of my pocket and said," '*They ought to have a statue of Louie and here's my dollar to start a fund to get a statue of Louie erected.*' "Roland Kirk said he didn't think it could be done but they all pitched in and I like to believe this was the start of fund-raising for the statue that now stands in the heart of New Orleans." (Note: In 1976 the noted Afro-American artist, Elizabeth Catlett, presented the statue of Louis Armstrong to the City of New Orleans during the Bicentennial Celebration.)

- over -

***** *****

Bob Wilber - "I first met Armstrong when I went to Europe replacing Sidney Bechet with Mezz Mezzrow's Band. We traveled on the plane with Louis and his All Stars for the first postwar Jazz Festival, Feb. 1948, in Nice, France. It was an exciting time for all the musicians and especially for me, my first tour of Europe.

"I was sitting right behind Louis and Jack Teagarden. Jack spent the whole night working on a mouthpiece for Louis with a file and sandpaper. Every once in awhile he would say to Louis, *'How is it?'* Louis would blow a few soft notes and Jack would go back to work on it some more. That morning, all the musicians gathered in the front of the plane where Louis led us in a rendition of the, *The Marseilles*, broadcast by the French Radio.

"After landing in Paris, we all took the train to Nice. The train pulled into the station and stopped with our second class coach right in front of where all the dignitaries and bands were waiting to greet us, leaving Joe Glaser, Louis' temperamental manager, Louis, Big T. and Hines way down the platform. I'll never forget Glaser running towards us shouting, *'Here we are . . . down here!'*

"One thing I have always admired about Louis was his total dedication to his horn and to the audience. By the way, Louis always referred to himself as '*Louis*' not '*Louie*'. "Armstrong was the Foundation of everything that has happened to make Jazz a unique 20th Century Music. Without Armstrong there would not be any jazz today. "With his white handkerchief, his toothy smile and his mugging, Louis was a great entertainer but when the horn went up to his lips the mugging ceased - the music was serious business."

***** *****

Dick Hyman - "Louis Armstrong created the vocabulary of the jazz solo. It is his language that we are still speaking. He accomplished this with an artist's passion and joy, not as an academic system, but we all continue to study and analyze his remarkable achievement."

***** *****

Now to turn back the pages of jazz history and read from the first jazz book ever written, Hugues Panassié's, *Hot Jazz*, published in 1934. He writes a prophetic chapter devoted exclusively to young Louis Armstrong who was then just on the threshold of his triumphant career on trumpet. Fascinating to many jazz scholars is the author's intriguing, critical attention given to Armstrong's singing. In part, Panassié observes: "His voice seems to have been made expressly for hot singing. From such a point of view it is uniquely beautiful. But what queer surprise it can furnish!"

The pioneer of jazz writing and criticism concludes his chapter on Armstrong with compelling conviction: "I do not think I am making too strong a statement when I say that Louis Armstrong is not only a genius in his own art, but is one of the most extraordinary creative geniuses that music has ever known."

Brahms, Beethoven and Bach - move over boys, make room for Louis Armstrong.

* * *

Wilma Dobie is a 25-year member of UJC. She was the Jazz Chairman of the Overseas Press Club since 1974, and presented its famous monthly jazz series for over 18 years, until she left for Florida about 5 years ago. She conquered throat cancer at about the same time, after going through 6 weeks of daily radiation treatments. She still works hard at her job, traveling around the US to cover important jazz events. She may be reached at: 561/694-6704; fax: 561-694-6552; email: Famadwz@aol.com.

This article originally appeared in the June 2000 Issue of *The American Rag* and is reprinted with permission.

The American Rag is an independent newspaper which encourages reader participation and is written by journalists with a special interest in and knowledge of vintage jazz, ragtime and other early American music forms, as well as some Americana and period humor.

Don Jones, Publisher/Editor
13298 Country Club Dr.
Victorville, CA 92392

Email: don@americanrag.com - Website: www.americanrag.com